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## After Life

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### Abstract

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RUKHSANA AHMAD

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The door bell chimed a little impatiently the second time just as Chandra stumbled to it and started fumbling with the long column of locks. Her face fell at the sight of Ba'drek. He stood in the hushed hallway, swaying a little, his posture laced with alcoholic defiance, his face a grotesque mask of self-conscious guilt.

'Sorry, my dear!' he whispered theatrically. 'I thought you didn't hear it the first time.'

'I must've been asleep ...!' Chandra pushed tired fingers through her dark curls with a sigh but she dutifully faced his kiss, a pungent barb of expensive after-shave, whisky and Havana cigars.

'I thought I'd made a mistake about tonight! Stop that groping, darling, I haven't even eaten yet!' she pouted, with exemplary patience.

'*Wallah!* Just like my wife!' he protested. 'It's nearly two in the morning! You should have eaten! Amazing how a woman in London can use the same wicked tactics as a woman in Bahrain!'

Chandra held back a sharp retort and summoned the shreds of a smile instead to lighten her muttered reproach, 'Comes with the packaging perhaps? So, you're not telling me where you were? Hum?'

But Ba'drek was no longer listening. He had flung his cashmere overcoat and gloves on the floor and followed them. There he sat unwrapping a small package painstakingly, as if in slow motion, all his attention concentrated on the moment and the task. She stopped short, her heart missed a beat. Perhaps he had bought her a very expensive gift to make up for his appalling time-keeping.

'You'll never believe this!' He spoke in a low voice tense with excitement. Chandra stood still, watching. The last layer of brown paper came off: but there was no velvet case – only an ordinary looking jam jar – probably some special *halvah* from Bahrain. She was in no mood to humour the nostalgia it would prompt. Besides, she hated Middle Eastern sweets, *invariably fattening!* Feeling resentful at his disregard for her ruined evening, she turned towards the kitchen to find some food.

'Chandra, Chandi my love,' he was huskily persuasive now. 'Come here for a moment. Just come and see this!'

'Coming,' once again she tried to contain and conceal her irritation.

'I've paid almost three million pounds for this! Show some interest in it, woman!'

'What *is* it?' she complied immediately this time, but he was intent

upon the jar and said nothing. His voice was deep and sombre as a gong when he finally looked up and spoke, 'Einstein's eyes. Preserved in Formaldehyde!'

'What!' she laughed in spite of herself. 'You can't be serious!'

'I *am* serious! Look at them!' Ba'drek's voice held awe. 'Isn't it incredible? The man of the century! The prophet of the future! Science! I have it all here in my grasp – in this little jam jar.'

She took the bottle from his hands and held it up to the light, aghast. True enough, there was a pair of human eyes floating in clear liquid inside it. She gazed at them and they stared back, sober and wise.

'Where in God's name did you get them?' she cried, bewildered. Inwardly, she felt ... horrified ... and repulsed and ... more than a little ... shocked.

'I bought them – at an auction. Paid a lot of money for them: 4.8 million dollars, to be exact.'

'But why? Why did you want them? Why should anyone want them?' she felt bemused.

'It's a collector's item, darling! An investment. They're the eyes of a great man, a genius. A success. They're lucky ... a talisman.'

Chandra was stunned, 'What a bizarre idea, Ba'drek. Who was selling them?'

'His ophthalmologist. He removed them at the autopsy – for scientific research. They're bound to be incredibly lucky. They certainly were for him,' he said, as he rose to undress. 'I mean, not only for Einstein but also for this ophthalmologist.'

Chandra said nothing. She was overwhelmed by it all. She'd always known that Ba'drek was extremely wealthy. 'He's loaded!' Shekhar had said when he introduced them at the Club's New Year's Eve party a couple of months ago, but somehow she had not guessed how seriously rich he was. True, earlier that summer he had bought a bottle of wine at Sotheby's in an auction at a price which had surprised them all. To his own utter embarrassment, he had made the Thames news headlines with that. Even so, at thirty-three thousand pounds the wine represented for her an imaginable sum of money. But that he should spend three million pounds – at a go – just like that! For this, so-called *collector's item* ... amazed her! The wealth gap between them was much *much* wider than she'd ever imagined.

'Be careful with it,' he crooked his finger at her as she sat musing. Even in his inebriated state he noticed the faraway look in her eyes. 'That would make an expensive smash, my dear! Anyway, why so quiet? What are you dreaming of? Einstein?'

Chandra shuddered and put the bottle down carefully on the coffee table. 'No; oh, no. I'd be no match for him. I was hopeless at Science. To be honest, I never understood that Relativity business.' She glanced apologetically at the eyes which now looked much less real. One of them had carelessly floated above the other in a silent gesture of disembodied

protest.

'Not many people do,' Ba'drek comforted her. 'Anyway, you don't want to fill your pretty little head with all that scientific nonsense! Come to bed, now? Hum? You're not still angry with me, are you?' he almost cajoled.

'In a moment. I'll get a hot drink first ... can't eat, after all this.' She felt guilty thinking about food with *those eyes* in the room. There was no way she could get into bed with Ba'drek and ... and let him 'make love' to her ... not with *those eyes* on the table. Surely, it would be wrong! They had a presence, somehow.

'Are we going to leave them out here?' she could not help asking him, feeling as anxious about being watched as about the risk of theft.

'For tonight, yes. Tomorrow I'll take them to the Bank. They've been in a vault, all these years!' With that he turned over on his side and dropped off to sleep with the predictable and admirable speed of someone who has had one too many.

Still stunned at the price of those eyes, Chandra sat down to look at them again, her heart unwilling to believe that they really were Einstein's. She imagined the auctioneer's sharp tone, professional, querulous: 'Ladies and gentlemen, do I hear one point four million ...?' wondering what the introductory line had been, what the opening bid might have been, wondering if the auction had been terribly exclusive? Questions chased each other, racing through her mind, but the eyes told her nothing. Morbid or gruesome though the idea of buying them might seem, they had obviously been in demand. Ba'drek was not reckless or foolish with money. He must be certain of a spiralling increase in their future value.

She remembered protesting at that last auction, 'So much money just for a bottle of wine! Can anyone bear to drink wine at that price? Will you drink it, Ba'drek?'

'You don't drink it!' he had admonished patronizingly. 'That would be sacrilege! I'll present it to an important business contact ... it will pay for itself, and more. And *he* might do the same. Unless he's a real hoarder, then he'll keep it, I suppose! If he's not, he'll sell it again ...'

'I see. I'm just curious about this world of collector's items ... !' Chandra had glanced round the gracious Mayfair drawing room dotted with exclusive curios: gold-plated replicas of the horses from St. Mark's, numbered prints in gilt frames, fine crystal, rare pieces of china. He only ever bought limited editions – always at shocking prices. It was hard to explain to him her horror at the gaping chasm between *those* prices and prices in the world she had come from – just across the river near Battersea Park.

She sat now shivering a little, staring at the jam jar whilst he snored in the background. Sleep had deserted her. It struck her with uncanny force that night how frighteningly poor she was in comparison with him! In the last few weeks, besides paying her generously for her services as a classy

escort, he'd bought her some very expensive pieces of jewellery. The kind of jewellery she knew she would like to hoard – at least as long as she could. But, even so! The injustice of the difference in their wealth and status was unbearable as it stared her in the face – in the form of a price tag.

This jam jar with its precious cargo will sit in a vault for many years, a useless *collector's item*. What a useful choice of words! It dehumanized the eyes, turned them into an object, made them less scary, less real. One could pretend they were inert and soulless, like the dried cheetah skins in her uncle's house.

Why had he paid a fortune for them? Only to possess them? Or was it to multiply his wealth? Three million pounds was an unimaginable amount of money. Truly a fortune! A fortune that could enable her to give up this ... awful ... escort ... no, prostitution ... business which she'd been trapped in for countless years.

Abruptly, Chandra stopped thinking. She rose, gathered her belongings and got her coat. Mechanically she put her car keys into her pocket, picked up the jam jar and slipped it into her handbag; then, glancing at Ba'drek, as if to bid him farewell, she left his flat, not as she usually did around midday, but in the middle of the night, like a thief.

She whispered something to the night porter about her mother being seriously ill. He smiled at her politely, certain that her hasty midnight departure signified a lover's tiff, but he said nothing. She was one of three of Ba'drek's favourites.

In a panic Chandra rushed to her car and drove as fast as she dared, dreaming all the while of a comfortable future secured by a fabulous fortune. The fairy lights on Chelsea Bridge twinkled with promise against the fading night. 'London is so much more beautiful in the small hours of the morning,' she thought, and then, 'God! Minnie won't be pleased to see me at this time. What if she has a client with her? But there's nothing for it now. I've got to do what I set out to do!'

The row of flats facing Battersea Park frowned at her in silent censure as she drove into the forecourt, brakes screeching. Minnie answered the door quickly enough but stared at her friend in open dismay. 'Have you been drinking?' she asked, after a brief silence.

Chandra's denial did not convince her; and her story even less so. Her eyes large and incredulous, she shook her head and kept repeating, 'But how could you do that, Chandi, my love? Even if they are Einstein's bloody eyes, you'll never be able to sell them, or do anything with them! Take them back. For fuck's sake, go back before he wakes up. He'll call the police, won't he? You'll hate yourself for this tomorrow, you know!'

The more Minnie begged her to return them, the more irritated Chandra felt at her friend's lack of gumption. 'You're scared, Minnie! Confess! You're gutless, aren't you?' she taunted. 'You don't want to be an accessory or whatever it is!'

'No. That's right ... I don't.'

Seething with anger Chandra stamped out of Minnie's flat. Raging over the injustices of the world and mad at herself for not having thought through how she would dispose of this easy loot to set herself up for retirement at thirty-five, she drove without purpose or direction for a long while before realizing how hungry she was. Then, spotting an all-night hamburger bar, she went in to buy herself a burger and fries. The young Sri Lankan assistant stared at her curiously as she sat down at a table, feigning indifference.

'What would he say if I asked him to help me?' Chandra wondered, munching her chicken burger between sips of coffee. 'No one else will!' Her brother in Birmingham would be horrified at the thought of dealing with a fence and she would be too easily identified.

Synthetic though it was, the food helped to clarify things. Minnie was right: no one would collaborate with her in a theft like this, and there was no way she could pull it off on her own! Feeling thwarted, she opened her bag to find her cigarettes. The jam jar gaped at her, making her start. Quickly she snapped her handbag shut, as if to prevent a bottled genie escape. In a flash, she saw the obscenity of it all. Dead eyes! They weren't going anywhere!

She pulled out the bottle furtively and stared into the dark pupils. Fifty years of Formaldehyde had not snuffed out the fulsome glow of life in the iris, and that glitter of ... something else. An extraordinary expression! Was it intelligence, or knowledge, or a vision? She'd never seen anything like it before. They must be alive.

Whoever had heard of eyes that went on living on their own like this? A chilly draught crept in underneath the door frame, making her tremble. Gravely, the eyes accused her ... of ... something. Murder perhaps? *She* had dehumanized them too, tried to quantify their value as a material investment. For the first time that night, she was struck by the human cost of her macabre merchandise.

The remains of a great man! Had the world cared so little for him? Had there not been any loved ones looking out for him, to save him from the vultures? His eyes stolen from his corpse, bought at an auction, and then ... to be stolen ... by a ... a tart! Tears of shame stung her eyelids. The windows to his soul – what if his soul could still reach through and watch everything that was going on? What if they'd recorded her theft like a surveillance camera? She felt mortified.

'A whore, yes, but a thief, never! I must return them,' she thought, 'to Ba'drek's flat before he wakes up ... and then ... then, I'll go home ... to sleep and recover from my ... er ... transgression!'

Outside the all-night cafe Chandra paused to inhale deep jugfuls of fresh air to invigorate herself. Before getting into her car she glanced at that old pair of eyes once again. She could have sworn they twinkled at her in the semi-darkness.